



Emergency Management

UPDATE

August 2001

Photo by John Nelson



Photo by Eric DiNovo

Scenes from the flood. The only thing rumbling through the historic coal-mining town of Bluefield, Va., July 8 was floodwater from torrential rains (left). Afterward, the United Methodist disaster relief team joined a host of volunteer groups to clean up debris in Bishop, Va., and other affected localities. (Photos courtesy Bluefield Daily Telegraph.)

Rapid response speeds Tazewell flood recovery

By Bob Lambert, Staff Writer

In short order, slow-moving, snake-like bands of intense rain turned the placid creeks of Tazewell County into muddy, swollen torrents.

No respecter of jurisdictional boundaries, the floodwaters slammed through the historic coal-mining town of Bluefield, where only the Virginia-West Virginia state line separates it from the city of Bluefield, W.Va.

Even with the highest elevation of any town in Virginia, Bluefield didn't escape the runoff from steep-sided mountains into pinched, narrow valleys.

Mudslides wreaked havoc in the area near Tazewell with the towns of Bishop, Pocahontas and Tazewell experiencing major flooding.

The deluge damaged nearly 700 Tazewell County homes and 50 businesses, wrenched tanks containing potentially hazardous materials from their foundations and created logistical challenges for Virginia and West Virginia as they responded to the disaster.

Gov. Jim Gilmore deployed key VDEM emergency management and hazmat personnel to Tazewell, who coordinated activities with State Police and Department of Transportation personnel to assure a rapid response to this emergency.

On July 12, Gilmore announced that President Bush had approved his expedited request for a federal disaster declaration for Tazewell County.

"The flooding in the Tazewell area was devastating to hundreds of residents and business owners," Gilmore said.

"The assistance programs available under this disaster declaration will play a big part in helping flood victims recover from the effects of this destructive storm."

Water continued to be a major source of concern as the Department of Health addressed the problem of contaminated drinking water, and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources inspected dams in the area.

The National Guard provided air support for hazmat container location and assessment. VDEM coordinated the efforts

of the Baptist General Association and other Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) to feed flood victims and help clean up damaged homes.

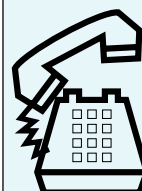
In nearby counties of West Virginia, already reeling from earlier flooding, federal assistance was expanded to include this event. (continued on page 4)

Donations hotline established

VDEM has set up a toll-free number to accept financial donations for the victims of severe flooding in Tazewell County on July 8.

Donors may call toll-free to 1-877-245-5513 to make a contribution. The line will be staffed Monday through Friday from 8:15 a.m. to 5 p.m. After-hours callers can leave a message.

Donated funds will be distributed to flood victims through local recovery organizations.



Consider the source: keys to effective disaster warnings

By Janet Clements
VDEM Public Affairs Director

As we turn the calendar to August and September, hurricanes and flooding pose a very real threat along the coast as well as inland areas. Emergency managers need a number of strategies to convince a wide variety of people to take the necessary action to protect themselves and their families.

A key part of that process is ensuring the public knows what to do in advance and will act appropriately when we issue a warning.

The first step is to make every effort to alert those living in at-risk flood plain or surge areas to the potential dangers they face.

Managers should clearly delineate areas within their

jurisdiction subject to floods and publicize them.

When an emergency does occur, they must issue a warning message that is credible, prompt, consistent and specific in detail.

If citizens doubt the validity, clarity or consistency of the warning message, they may conclude they are not at risk and ignore it.

The message must answer three general questions:

- What is happening?
- What does it mean to the person being warned?
- What should that person do?

It must also contain precise information about the location, timing and magnitude of the impending disaster. Any vagueness will neutralize the sense of threat.

Repeating an official message helps reinforce the

importance of evacuation. If citizens are able to confirm message content from a variety of sources, they are more likely to comply.

Recommending that people encourage family and friends to leave threatened areas will often do more to get these endangered citizens to safety than the official warning message alone.

Research from recent disasters has also shown that most people receiving an official order to evacuate will leave. Directives rather than recommendations are clearly more effective.

For more detailed information about how the public looks at and reacts to warnings, check our Web site at www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate.

Translating disaster warnings to actions

Reaching our audience is not enough. Here are a few suggestions to help you meet the real challenge of getting citizens to take action:

- ▼ Create a checklist of essential warning elements ahead of time. This step makes it easier to craft messages under pressure.
- ▼ Focus on creative ways to reach those less apt to listen.
- ▼ Set up a public inquiry line that enables people to confirm what they've heard.



Targeted Search. Tom Stanley, Wise County Regional Hazmat Team (right), uses GPS to get a fix on a floating container while Robert Wilson, Giles County Hazmat Team, assists in the ongoing location and recovery effort. (Photo by Janet Clements).

GPS helps HMOs track down missing tanks

The creeks and hollows of mountainous, largely rural Tazewell County put hazmat officers to the test in locating errant fuel and propane tanks loosened by the July flood.

The flooded areas along the Clinch and Bluestone rivers and Johnson Branch were large and difficult to reach over narrow, winding roads and rugged terrain.

To make matters worse, overgrowth hid the streambeds, and tanks were often far from the nearest roadway.

Hazmat officers flew in a National Guard helicopter looking for tanks, and ground teams battled deep water, snakes, steep riverbanks and thick vegetation trying to check creek beds. In some areas, they took to canoes to locate tanks.

"It was the only way to look for them," says VDEM Area 6 Hazmat Officer Jack Tolbert.

"The biggest obstacle after locating the tanks is going back and getting them and figuring how to get them back to the road," Tolbert says.

"You're in a rural area with a lot of mountains. If the tank is on the opposite side of the river from the road, you don't know how to get it back."

A global positioning system (GPS) receiver and an inexpensive computer mapping program loaded onto a laptop made the job a lot easier.

With a portable printer, hazmat officers could produce detailed maps for later use in retrieving the tanks and drums for proper disposal.

"We've used GPS in floods before," Tolbert says. "The mapping program made a big

difference because it produced a detailed map showing exactly where each container was located — even pinpointing it behind a row of houses."

Although Tazewell once was home to a thriving coal industry, there is little activity in the area now. Most of the containers were propane and fuel tanks and drums containing motor oil.

The Tazewell County landfill set up a special staging area to drain the retrieved containers. Pits were dug and lined with plastic. An absorbent material soaked up residual fuel drained from the tanks, which was then recycled.

The terrain did make one aspect of recovering the tanks and containers easier — almost as quickly as the valleys filled with torrents of rain, the water drained away.



Getting the lay of the land. Nelson County's scenic vistas can make search and rescue a daunting task. (Photo by Kathy Plunket Versluys.)

Volunteers aid Nelson County SAR

By Bob Lambert, Staff Writer

When rapid response can mean the difference between life and death, Nelson County can put a Search and Rescue (SAR) force at the scene in half an hour.

After the body of a missing little girl was found in February 1999, officials in the mountainous locality decided they could improve the response time of their search and rescue program by using a cadre of trained citizen volunteers.

"We got started quickly after this incident," says Raymond Uttaro, emergency management coordinator. "My office and the sheriff's office pushed to get people together ahead of time for search and rescue."

The effort has attracted 100 volunteers, ranging in age from 16 to more than 50 and possessing a variety of talents.

"Age and ability aren't important," Uttaro says. "We need people to do logistics. We need others to do a lot of running around. We can find a job for them to do."

Two thirds of the group earned certification in basic techniques through VDEM's SAR program, administered by the state and the Virginia Rescue Squad Association.

For those who go into the field during a SAR mission, knowing the lay of the land is a big plus — and that takes training.

"We're very rural and you can get turned around very quickly. We train people in basic compass and map reading so they know where they are going," Uttaro says. "We won't have to worry about volunteers getting lost on deployment — they're already familiar with the territory."

Although Nelson County is sparsely populated, the value of a volunteer force is also applicable to other more populous localities. "Immediate response is very essential," Uttaro says. "The [search for that] little girl taught us that every community should have specialized SAR."

SAR training is open to all jurisdiction emergency responders, both paid and volunteer. To learn more, check the VDEM Web site at www.vdem.state.va.us or contact Winnie Pennington, SAR program coordinator, by phone at (804) 674-2422 or e-mail at wpennington@vdem.state.va.us.

For further information about the Nelson County volunteer program, contact Raymond Uttaro at (804) 263-6943 or by e-mail at nce911@aol.com.

Newport News opens doors and minds to special needs issues

*By Theresa Lazar, Emergency Planner
Newport News Office of Emergency Management*

Emergency situations are stressful for all citizens but can be especially traumatic for those with physical, emotional and cognitive/medically-related disabilities, as well as the elderly and frail.

To alert these individuals to evacuation and sheltering alternatives during disasters, the Newport News Office of Emergency Management recently hosted a series of one-day workshops titled "Disaster Preparedness for Vulnerable Populations and Their Caregivers."

Our Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator Don Druitt kicked off the program with an overview of the threats most likely to affect our community.

After a tour of our EOC, the Newport News Police Communications Division gave participants valuable information on the Special Needs Registration Program. This service allows emergency responders to be better prepared to provide for the special needs population day-to-day as well as during emergencies.

Then, we provided a detailed summary of what to expect from public shelters and discussed sheltering options. We stressed that attendees should assess their physical capabilities, residences and area in which they live to make an informed decision about whether to evacuate or stay in place.

At the end of the presentation, participants had the opportunity to ask questions of a panel composed of emergency management personnel. They also received a free disaster kit, which included planning brochures, an emergency health information card, poncho, first aid kit, flashlight with batteries, toothbrush, soap and checklists.

Disasters and emergencies pose additional challenges to those with special needs. These workshops enabled us to reach out to encourage our citizens to be prepared so they can maintain good health and safety during an emergency. Being proactive will help ensure the safety of these individuals when the need arises.

Contact Theresa Lazar at (757) 269-2900 or by e-mail at tlazar@ci.newport-news.va.us to learn more about the special needs programs in Newport News.



Special interest group. Newport News Special Needs Coordinator Theresa Lazar outlines what disabled citizens can expect from shelters in an emergency situation during one of the workshops (courtesy photo).

Get Update online at www.vdem.state.va.us/emupdate.

Training Calendar

Emergency Management

Emergency Planning Workshop
August 14-16/Roanoke

Effective Communication
August 28-30/Richmond

Exercise Design
September 12-13/Williamsburg

Developing Volunteer Resources
September 19-20/Newport News

Reservist Training

Action Tracking System
August 9 & September 13/Richmond

Search and Rescue

SAR Adjunct Instructor Meeting
September 22/Richmond

Technological Hazards

Public Safety Response to Terrorism (PSRT) — Tactical Considerations
August 9-10/Ft. Pickett

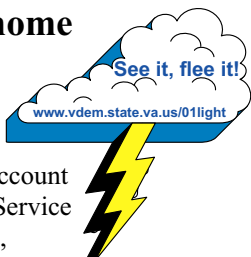
PSRT — Awareness
August 26/Dinwiddie County



Don't miss the 18th Annual Hazardous Materials Conference, Sept. 27-29, at the DoubleTree Hotel in Virginia Beach. Registration information is available on the VDEM and Conventions Plus Web sites at www.vdem.state.va.us and www.convplus.com.

Lightning strikes close to home

Three years ago, Matt Friedman, 13, was camping with his friends in Craig County, Va., when he was struck by lightning. Read his personal account and explore the new National Weather Service "Lightning Kills, Play It Safe" Web site, complete with video public service announcements and testimonies from lightning victims.



Tazewell Recovery (continued from page 1)

Under the national Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), Gilmore dispatched more than 300 National Guardsmen to West Virginia to assist in the cleanup.

"When a community straddles a state border, you put the response ahead of the jurisdictional line," says VDEM Deputy Coordinator George Foresman. "You send resources to the area and they help victims regardless of which state they live in."

"In the context of other events in Virginia, this was a concentrated disaster, but to the victims it was the biggest event in their lives. County officials and agencies, our state and federal partners and volunteer organizations performed well and responded quickly."



Lending a hand. Virginia National Guard soldiers provide aid to citizens in Kimball, W.Va., through EMAC. (Photo by Lt. Col. Chester Carter, Virginia National Guard Public Affairs Office.)

This month in Virginia storm history

Tropical Storm Allison opened the 2001 Hurricane season by taking 50 lives in six states. In Virginia, our most memorable lesson on inland flooding was in 1969.

On August 17, Hurricane Camille smashed the Mississippi Coast as a Category 5 storm with 200 mph winds. While the storm weakened, it tracked northward and then turned east. On August 20, thunderstorms from the tropical depression passed through the Blue Ridge south of Charlottesville dumping 31 inches of rain in 12 hours.

The ensuing flood and mudslide killed an estimated 153 people (most in Nelson County) making Camille Virginia's worst disaster. Damage estimates reached \$113 million (1969 dollars).



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